



PRESS RELEASE

House National Security Committee

Floyd D. Spence, Chairman

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DOE LAX ON BACKGROUND CHECKS OF FOREIGN VISITORS TO NUCLEAR WEAPONS LABS

Sensitive information may have been disclosed to foreign nationals

House National Security Committee Chairman Floyd D. Spence (R-SC) today released a General Accounting Office (GAO) report that reveals the Department of Energy's (DOE) failure to employ important security measures, including background checks on foreign visitors, at its nuclear weapons laboratories. According to the report, DOE's security failures may have resulted in "sensitive subjects be[ing] discussed with foreign nationals..."

"This is obviously a matter of great concern," said Spence, "DOE's laboratories contain enormous amounts of information sensitive to U.S. national security – including information regarding production, maintenance, and improvement of U.S. nuclear weapons. DOE's failure to adequately protect such information raises serious questions that demand immediate attention."

The House National Security Committee, in its report accompanying the fiscal year 1997 National Defense Authorization Act (H. Rept. 104-563), directed GAO to review security at DOE weapons laboratories as a follow-up to a 1988 GAO report that warned that foreign nationals had visited U.S. nuclear weapons laboratories without adequate security controls. Despite GAO's warning, the report released today, *Department of Energy: DOE Needs to Improve Controls Over Foreign Visitors to Weapons Laboratories* (GAO/RCED-97-229), indicates that DOE has done little to remedy the situation.

"As far as I'm concerned, DOE should have tightened their security measures as soon as GAO revealed a problem almost ten years ago. Even though the Cold War is over, DOE has an obligation to protect critical U.S. nuclear weapons secrets," said Spence.

According to the report, "DOE's procedures for obtaining background checks and controlling the dissemination of sensitive information are not fully effective." Although DOE "requires" background checks of foreign nationals visiting its laboratories, the Department has waived the requirement for two of its three nuclear weapons labs. According to GAO, these two DOE labs have performed background checks on only about five percent of foreign visitors from "sensitive" nations over the past three years. As a result, several individuals with suspected foreign intelligence connections have visited DOE nuclear weapons labs with no prior background checks.

“Background checks are just one of several important tools DOE should be using to protect sensitive information,” said Spence. “It’s simply common sense that DOE should know who’s visiting our labs, seeing our technology, and learning about U.S. weapons production, maintenance, and design.”

Copies of the report are available from GAO.

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A brief summary of the GAO report’s key conclusions follows:

DOE labs are not adequately implementing security measures. The GAO report indicates that, since 1994, the Los Alamos and Sandia laboratories have performed background checks on only about one in twenty visitors from “sensitive” countries. This failure to perform background checks deprives DOE officials of an important tool with which they may base security measures implemented during visits. In addition, the GAO report notes that DOE lacks clear guidelines by which officials processing visit requests can identify requests to discuss “sensitive” subjects and notify DOE officials. As a result, GAO investigators identified several visits that involved sensitive subjects that DOE never had the opportunity to review and approve.

DOE security controls are weak. According to the GAO report, laboratory areas that are most often visited by foreign nationals have inadequate security levels. GAO investigators discovered that in one such area, several boxes marked “sensitive materials” were left in a hallway accessible to foreign visitors. At another labs, classified information was contained in a newsletter sent to 11 foreign nationals.

DOE laboratory counterintelligence programs need improvement. During the investigation, GAO discovered that DOE’s counterintelligence programs are not based on a comprehensive threat assessment that examines the nature and extent of foreign espionage activities. This failure to take in the “big picture” spreads counterintelligence resources thin and fails to focus on those areas most likely threatened by foreign intelligence efforts.